

February 23, 2023
Testimony from Joel Tolman, Common Ground High School
To the Joint CT Appropriations Committee
Co-Chairs Sen. Osten, Sen. McCrory, Rep. Walker and Rep. Felipe

My name is Joel Tolman, and I work at Common Ground High School in New Haven, Connecticut. I am so grateful for all the members of the Appropriations Committee and its Education Subcommittee for hearing all our voices today. I am grateful in particular to our Representative Toni Walker and our New Haven delegation, for always standing up for young people, and for educational equity.

Common Ground has been my home for the last twenty years. As a classroom teacher, and as a member of Common Ground's leadership team, I've been talking with state legislators for years about how we can keep working toward fair funding for our state's public schools. After twenty years of showing up and making slow, uneven progress, this legislative session feels like it could be a watershed moment.

For most of the last twenty years, I've been talking with my students about public school finance too. They are smart, thoughtful young people, who ask hard questions before taking a stand. Over the last few weeks, I have been talking with a number of students about the Governor's draft budget, HB 5003, and other ways this year's legislative session might impact their educational experiences. We've been doing what we do at Common Ground: We use multiple sources, break down the text of bills and news coverage, figure out what it means, talk through how it would impact our small school. We debate, consider multiple points of view, anticipate counter-arguments, share our experiences, raise our voices.

I won't try to speak for these brilliant, capable young people. Several of them have submitted written testimony, since they had other commitments – early college classes, family care responsibilities, medical appointments, getting a good night's sleep – that kept them from being here themselves.

I want to back up what these young people have to say, and share a little of my own experience. More than anything, I'm worried about the critical supports and opportunities that will go away if the governor's draft budget moves forward.

I know that our two full-time school social workers, and our full time nurse – all positions that grew to meet our students' needs during the pandemic – are booked supporting students every minute of the day. I know that our support educators – who play an absolutely critical role in providing one on one and small group support to students – are already stretched thin covering classes when teachers are out sick. I know that the additional state funding that comes through COVID recovery has helped us to step up and better meet the needs of the 25% of our student body who qualify for special education support, and the 15% of our students who qualify for accommodations through 504 plans.

I know that our students are hungry for additional challenges, as well, and that feeding this hunger takes adequate funding. This spring, 40 of our 225 students – many as young as sophomores – signed up for early college classes around the corner at Southern Connecticut State University. To set them up for success, we check in with them every week, and another staff member tutors them as well. Nearly twice as many students signed up for AP classes this year as last year as well. Our students are getting certified in Google IT right now as well, thanks to a grant written by one of our students and funded by COVID relief funds through the state's Voices4Change initiative. Our students are sticking around for after-school programs like debate and investment club, math lab and our student-led cooking club. These programs have been a key part of our school model for years, but right now they're funded 100% by COVID relief dollars, because of the way cycles of after-school grant funding have worked out.

I'm really worried about all of this going away if the Governor's budget moves forward as proposed. This year, I've been feeling so much hope around the possibility of real progress toward equitable funding for all public schools in our state. This moment is not just about my students, or New Haven students, or charter school students, or students at any one group of schools. This legislative session is a chance to make sure that students at all public schools – charter, magnet, district, Voag, technical – go to schools funded based on the needs of their students. This year – with a budget surplus, with HB 5003 in the works – is a real chance to make sure students at all sorts of public schools, all over Connecticut, go to schools that are funded in an equitable way, and get the support and challenges they deserve. Students across the state who are going to see critical educational and mental health supports go away if we don't take advantage of this moment. It's so critical.

In the midst of this sense of possibility, when members of the General Assembly are showing courage and commitment to educational equity, the governor's budget proposal is really deflating. No steps toward equitable school funding. No funding for charter schools in Danbury and Norwalk that were approved to open years ago now. I am disappointed, and I hear the disappointment in my students' voices when we talk about this. I'm hoping that this Committee, and the General Assembly, can help us rebuild the hope, make the most of this moment, and make sure all public schools – including charters like Common Ground – are funded based on the needs of their students.

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